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Ukraine's Hidden Battlefield

ROBERT W. KURZ

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Ukraine's Hidden Battlefield

Robert W. Kurz

In May of 2016, I had the opportunity to travel to Kiev, Ukraine, for one week. My intent was to engage with the people, understand their perspectives, and, along with my colleagues, learn as much as possible in a very short time. My hope was that this brief trip would be the first of several journeys to the country and its neighbors, where I could observe the impact of the conflict in eastern Ukraine on the region.

Roughly two years earlier in neighboring Romania, I watched with amazement as local and international news showed Maidan unfolding into long, massive protests in Kiev's Independence Square. By February 22, 2014, Ukrainian President Yanukovych fled the country and Ukraine's parliament began to select a new cabinet. Russia's President Putin – known for being an opportunist – quickly used these developments as a pretext for Russia to exert its own interests. In less than a month, it annexed Crimea, and by April, pro-Russian separatists had begun taking over government buildings in eastern Ukraine's Kharkiv, Donetsk and Luhansk regions.¹



Figure 7.1 Map of Ukraine and region, 30 August 2016. Map courtesy of the Foreign Military Studies Office.

Today, even one-week visitors like me quickly assess that Kiev is, by most appearances, more stable than in 2014, but fraught with serious challenges. To say the least, it faces political turbulence over corruption, Russia's occupation of Crimea, and a volatile eastern Ukraine, where over 9,000 people have died in the conflict with little or no resolution from the Minsk Agreements. These topics – corruption, Crimea, and

the military conflict – are so palpable in Ukraine that they continually dominate the international media as well as thousands of analyses of what will happen next. Yet my visit revealed to me a hidden battlefield in Ukraine, one on which victory is measured by the effects of a quiet and penetrating influence that can alter the subconscious of the people as well as the outcome of most other battles. This battlefield is about a fight for persuasion and identity. While it is not new to conflict or war, its digital context is far-reaching and Russia has the initiative. Based largely on my observations and discussions with Ukrainian civilians and officials, this paper provides a brief, one-week snapshot of Ukraine’s hidden battlefield on which Russia employs indirect methods to accomplish its objectives.

Throughout my week in Kiev, Ukrainians repeatedly used the term “Russian Propaganda” as they described their country’s current challenges. In an initial discussion, a senior military official spent considerable effort explaining how Ukraine’s current conflict is technically an “artillery war.” Yet, to my surprise, he ended his long explanation with a brief, succinct divergence from his artillery discourse. He said that in this conflict “Russian propaganda was the main instrument of power,” that this propaganda was “at its highest,” and that it “splits Ukraine in half.” The official’s final statements were my entree into understanding the quieter – yet more pervasive and powerful – battle that Ukraine faces today.

A separate group of Ukrainians, on the subject of current security challenges, also prioritized Russian propaganda as a top issue for their country. Their research organized Russian influence into four major methods. The first is “Cultural Invasion,” where Russia uses its diaspora, language, entertainment, books, social networks, and the Moscow Orthodox Church to grow and leverage its influence in target areas. Dr. Mahir Ibrahimov, a cultural and language expert on this trip who lived, served and worked in the region for over 40 years, provided insight on this topic. He noted that for Ukraine, this might be one of the most difficult forms of Russian propaganda to distinguish, given the two countries’ interwoven histories and cultures.² The group called the second method “Historical Distortion.” They explained that Russia uses its vast array of connections in Ukrainian society to teach and reflect on key historical developments along misleading, anti-Western and pro-Russian themes. They identified the third method as “Centralized Media,” whereby Russia promotes its views by monopolizing or manipulating television, radio, and printed products inside Ukraine and elsewhere, in multiple languages. The fourth method is Russia’s “Information and Psychological Operations.” In Ukraine’s current conflict with pro-Russian separatists, this includes cell phone text messages, embedded journalists, social networks, and symbols such as the Cross of St. George, the Russian Federation colors, or the Great Patriotic War cult.

These methods seem to reflect some of the messages provided in an issue of Russia’s *Bulletin of the Academy of Military Science*. In his early 2015 article, Russian General-Lieutenant A. V. Kartapalov examined changes in the nature of armed struggle and what is described as “new-type” war.³ Kartapalov explained that conflicts now have a more protracted character and use indirect actions that have achieved results through demoralizing the enemy and inflicting damage on him without the use of force. The general includes a chart outlining a Russian view of this “new-type” war, wherein the initial stages are “Pressuring the Enemy Politically, Economically, Informationally and Psychologically;” “Disorienting the Political and Military Leadership of the State-Victim;” and “Spreading Dissatisfaction among the Population.”⁴ These initial stages are distinctly “indirect” methods of achieving goals in a “state-victim,” and can be used with or without the employment of force. While Kartapalov refers to US actions as examples of this “new-type” war, his explanation of the concept actually appears to coincide with Ukrainian observations, and is a well-written blueprint for Russia’s involvement in Ukraine to date. The graphic below reflects Kartapalov’s “new-type” war.⁵

Methods and Ways of Conducting a New-Type of War

Achieving Goals in New-Type Warfare in Combination with the Employment of Military Force or without it.

Set of Indirect Actions ("Hybrid Methods")

Pressuring the Enemy Politically, Economically, Informationally, and Psychologically

Disorienting the Political and Military Leadership of the State-Victim. Spreading Dissatisfaction among the Population

Preparing Armed Opposition Detachments and Sending Them to the Conflict Region

Intensifying Diplomatic Pressure and Propaganda to the World Community

Covertly Deploying and Employing Special Operations Forces, Cyber Attacks and Software Effects, Conducting Reconnaissance and Subversive Acts on a Large Scale, Supporting the Internal Opposition, and Employing New Weapon Systems

Shifting to Classical Methods of Waging War, Using Various Types of Weapons in Combination with Large-Scale Information Effects

Seizing Enemy Territory with the Simultaneous Action against (destruction of) Forces and Targets to the Entire Depth of His Territory

Employing Precision Weapons on a Large Scale, Extensively Using Special Operations Forces, Robotic Complexes, and Weapons Based on NPP

Liquidating Centers of Resistance with the Help of Artillery and Air Strikes, Delivering Precision Weapons Strikes, and Landing of Assault Forces. Clearing Out the Territory using Ground Forces. Establishing Full Control over the State-Victim.

Figure 7.2 Methods and Ways of Conducting a New-Type of War. Graphic courtesy of the Foreign Military Studies Office.

I briefly shared with these Ukrainians my understanding of "new-type" war, wherein a state initially uses indirect methods of "pressuring," "disorienting," and "spreading dissatisfaction" – without force – to achieve its goals in a target population.⁶ In response, the Ukrainians described a recent, historical pattern of Russian propaganda in their country that clearly utilized these methods to facilitate Moscow's interests and objectives. They explained that Russian propaganda in Ukraine distinctly rose and then dropped in 2004 relative to the Orange Revolution and spiked again in 2007 relative to the Russia-Ukraine gas disputes. In the summer of 2013, Russian propaganda ramped up again, paralleling then-Ukrainian

President Yanukovych's efforts to squelch dissent by taking control of the press. Based on my subsequent observations and discussions throughout the week, Russian propaganda and other influences in Ukraine have only intensified since that time, to include the aftermath of Maidan, the annexation of Crimea, and the ongoing separatist conflict . . . and have become a battlefield all their own.

I discovered a second theme in my discussions with Ukrainians, one that likely dominates Ukraine's hidden battlefield and is consistent with Kartapalov's explanation of indirect methods. Ukrainians in Kiev frequently emphasized their challenge in countering Russia's penetrating and often secretive presence and influence in multiple, critical sectors of Ukrainian society. Given the two countries' substantially intertwined history, it is no surprise that Russia has longstanding connections throughout Ukraine. Seventeen percent of Ukraine's population identifies as ethnic Russians, and thirty percent claim Russian as their mother tongue.⁷ Coupled with strong, historic business and cultural ties, the environment is optimal for the more powerful of the two countries to leverage heavy influence on the other. One of Ukraine's sectors that is most vulnerable to Russian influence is its media. In a discussion with a seasoned media expert, I learned how Russia is increasingly manipulating its connections to Ukraine's news industry to intensify anti-government sentiment in Kiev. The media spokesman explained that Russia's Main Intelligence Directorate (*Glavnoye razvedyvatel'noye upravleniye-GRU*) contacts Russian-backed journalists in Ukraine and tells them to arrive at a designated site before an unexpected, controversial incident begins there. Once the affair is underway, these journalists are the first to report – on local, national and international media – a pro-Russian view of the development, or that the Kiev government is to blame. The expert also explained that Russia is responsible for most of the country's cyber-attacks, including measures to sway Ukrainians or, as in Ukraine's post-Maidan elections, to actually shut down government systems. Coupled with its manipulation of Ukraine's broadcast media, these two can form an integrated and credible narrative detrimental to Ukraine's interests and political legitimacy. Russia's influence is clearly prevalent within Ukraine's news industry if it can provide both the catalyst for and coverage of powerful, politicized events.

Ukrainians described another sector of their society in which Russia has had an increasingly polarizing influence: the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. The two patriarchates in Ukraine – the Moscow Patriarchate and the Kiev Patriarchate (which split from the former in 1992) – claim to represent the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. A Ukrainian military officer told me that the two components of the Church had peacefully co-existed in his country until 2014, when the Moscow Patriarchate began overtly supporting Russia's actions in both Crimea and eastern Ukraine. The officer explained that the public had expected both components, in their efforts to represent the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, to come to the aid of Ukrainian casualties and their families. Instead, the Moscow Patriarchate distanced itself from the Ukrainian people for political reasons; this angered many Ukrainians enough to leave that church. Meanwhile, the Kiev Patriarchate has made a concentrated effort to help in the crisis, supporting first the protesters during the Maidan revolution – when it opened the doors of its Mikhailovsky Monastery as a safe haven and later as a hospital – and now the Ukrainian soldiers fighting against Russian-backed separatists. In a related press article, Kiev Patriarchate Archbishop Yevstratiy Zoria stated that "Moscow is using its influence over Ukraine in the church as an instrument of hybrid warfare against Ukraine."⁸ The article described how tensions between the two churches got so bad in 2015 that in one incident, a priest from the Moscow Patriarchate church stabbed a priest from the Kiev Patriarchate, allegedly shouting "For Russ! For the Orthodox faith!"⁹ Russia's ability to dis-unify the Ukrainian Orthodox Church hits deeply within Ukraine's society and exemplifies "new-type" war's indirect methods of "pressuring," "disorienting," and "spreading dissatisfaction," without force.¹⁰ About 65 percent of Ukrainians are members of the Orthodox Church, totaling about 27.8 million people.¹¹

Russia's influence within Ukraine's media and religious sectors is powerful, but its penetration of the country's front lines has had a demoralizing and divisive effect on soldiers and officers. The military's challenges on the conventional battlefield are being supplemented with what multiple Ukrainian officers describe as Russian threats internal to their units. On the front lines of eastern Ukraine, there has been a trend of Ukrainian soldiers receiving threatening texts on their mobile phones. Such texts are from unknown sources who address the soldiers by name, inform them that they are being watched exactly where they sit or stand, and warn them to stop fighting and to leave their unit. I learned that, in some cases, the texts included pictures of the soldier's family within the past 24-48 hours. These threats have caused absences and defections on the front lines, and have exacerbated Ukrainian commanders' ability to retain loyalty and personnel strength in their units.

Ukrainian military commanders' internal challenges also included their own staffs. On more than one occasion, military officers shared that, due to a concern over Russian influence, there is often only a fragile, cautious trust in officers both up and down their chain of command. One official explained that some commanders on the front line learned to limit information to their staffs, withhold critical data to the last minute, or even provide their staffs with false locations initially – in order to reduce the risk of their operational plans being shared with separatists before their mission began. This level of Russian intelligence and influence within Ukraine's defense community has a tangible and debilitating effect on its military, yet it is accomplished by indirect methods of war including social media and insider threats.

The issue of trust vis-à-vis military actions in Ukraine extends to the international level as well. During my week in Kiev, I learned that Ukraine has very little trust in two of the key organizations intended to ensure adherence to the Minsk Agreements and the inherent ceasefires. Many Ukrainians do not trust the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), mandated to observe and report on Ukraine's security situation including alleged Agreement violations, as it does not have a "no neighbors" policy. This means that Russia has been able to participate in the OSCE's Special Monitoring Mission (SMM) to Ukraine. Russia currently has the fourth largest staff out of 45 countries participating in the SMM, following the United States, United Kingdom, and Romania.¹² Moreover, the OSCE is a member of the Joint Control Commission (JCC) – mandated to clarify and resolve on-the-ground disputes related to the Minsk Agreements – along with authorities from the Ukrainian government and the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics.¹³ Based on my discussions in Kiev, there are up to 50 Russian officers affiliated with the JCC, and Ukrainians refer to it as the "Second Russian Invasion." From Ukraine's perspective, the presence of Russian personnel in both the OSCE and the JCC only multiplies Russia's capability to employ very influential, indirect methods to achieve its goals in their country.

This snapshot of Ukraine, its conflict, and perspectives from Kiev leads to a series of important facts and inferences. Ukraine is battling a strong and enduring undercurrent of Russian influence within its borders that is powerful enough to impact the outcome of this crisis. Russia owns the initiative in the conflict, and it can choose to escalate or de-escalate it using indirect, non-force methods designed to pressure, disorient and spread dissatisfaction within Ukraine's populace and leadership. Russia is concentrating this "new-type" approach in Ukraine's media sector, its Orthodox Church, and its defense community, with the intent to weaken public unity, debilitate key institutions, create social division, and discredit the Ukrainian government. On the front line, Russian intelligence and influence is integrated and ubiquitous throughout the tactical, operational, and strategic levels of Ukraine's military, making both horizontal and vertical coordination risky and cumbersome. Moreover, from Ukraine's perspective, Russia has a powerful presence within the international entities tasked with stabilizing the east Ukraine conflict, and is capable

of leveraging the monitoring functions and relevant political decisions to its favor. All of this comprises a battlefield largely unseen by most observers of the conflict, and it extends to nearly every feature on Ukraine's map.

[The opinions and characterizations in this piece are those of the author and do not necessarily represent official positions of the United States government.]

Notes

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3. General-Lieutenant A. V. Kartapalov was then the Chief of the Main Operations Directorate of the General Staff of Russia, and in late 2015 was named as the head of the Western Military District.
4. A. V. Kartapalov, “Lessons of Military Conflicts and Prospects for the Development of Means and Methods of Conducting Them, Direct and Indirect Actions in Contemporary International Conflicts,” *Vestnik Akademii Voennoykh Nauk (Bulletin of the Academy of Military Science)*, No. 2 (2015): 26-36.
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6. Kartapalov, “Lessons of Military Conflicts,” 26-36.
7. “Ukrainians Who Identify As Ethnic Russians or Say Russian Is their First Language,” *Radio Free Europe-Radio Liberty*, last modified 29 August 2016, accessed 30 December 2016, <http://www.rferl.org/contentinfographics/map-ukraine-percentage-who-identify-as-ethnic-russians-or-say-russian-is-their-first-language-/25323841.html>.
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